

## Arts Advocacy Day at the State House 2009

Speech by Scott Lapham, Photographer and Founder of AS220's Photo Lab

As a young person my own academic performance was very challenging in a school system that had some awareness of learning disabilities. The art room became a refuge for me and gave me an entrance into a productive adulthood. As high school was coming to end I was grateful for the chance to apply and go to art school with the portfolio I made in my public school's art class room. It gave me hope when other traditional avenues of adulthood felt closed to me.

After graduating from RISD I became a free lance commercial photographer, started the AS220 Community Darkroom and the youth Photography program called Photographic Memory. Since 1995 the AS220 Darkroom has continuously offered facilities and services to hundreds of Rhode Island Photographers who would not have had these facilities otherwise.

Our youth program Photographic Memory works with under served teenagers from group homes, the RI Training School and the larger RI youth community. These students often have no other arts education in their lives. In Photographic Memory dedicated students work on personal portfolios that have successfully been used in college applications. Over the years our students have been accepted to Hampshire, Pratt, Chicago Institute of Art and twice to RISD on the strength of their portfolios created in our class. One of my current students started his photographic education in the RI Training School ( RI's juvenile detention facility) by making a camera out of cardboard, an aluminum can and tape. Two weekends ago he got paid to photograph his first wedding. While my students are talented, they are not abnormally talented. The difference in their attaining success or not was access to caring instructors and facilities. At the highest commitment level of our program students learn to assist professional photographers on commercial jobs. Of course not all of my students will go to college or become photographers. Some choose not to go while others are accepted to college but cannot afford it, even with generous scholarships. This is also why I am excited to think that the mentoring and skills students learn in Photographic Memory class can translate to other jobs and careers.

Without my own arts education I would not be positively affecting the young lives that I do now. My students would not have the positive real world experiences they do now. While I think that my colleagues and I at AS220 and other non profits offering after school arts programming in Rhode Island do a great job, we affect only a small percentage of our young people. When strong arts programming in our Public Schools is thought of as an extra we are limiting our students lives and losing many young people who need the arts to be productive adults.